



# The Hashemites: The Dream of Arabia (Makers of the Modern World)

By Robert McNamara

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The story of the Arab Revolt and the Hashemite princes who led it during the First World War is inextricably linked in modern eyes to the legend of Lawrence of Arabia as portrayed in David Lean's 1962 film. But behind this romantic image lies a harsher reality of wartime expediency, double-dealing and dynastic ambition, which shaped the modern Middle East and laid the foundations of many of the conflicts that rack the region to this day. Arab nationalists claim that British instigation for the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire was a commitment to independence for the Arab people, but in this book Robert McNamara shows how the British cultivated the Hashemite Sherifs of Mecca more as an alternative focus during the First World War for Muslim loyalty from the Ottoman Sultan, who as Caliph had declared a jihad against the Allies when the Turks joined the Central Powers, than a leader of an independent and united Arabia. At the same time, the Sykes-Picot Agreement divided up the Middle East between British and French spheres of influence. The sense of betrayal that this caused has coloured Arab nationalists' views of the West ever since. The main countries of the Middle East — Jordan, Syria and Iraq—are all the creations of the post-First World War settlement worked out at the Paris Peace Conference. The story of the Hashemite dynasty at the Paris Peace Conference is the story of the birth of the modern history of a region that is now more than ever at the centre of world affairs.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

Robert McNamara, a lecturer in International History at the University of Ulster, has written a timely and rich study. Not only is the Western library in need of many honest, veracious, elucidatory and analytical studies on the modern involvement of European powers in this crucial region, but the general public in much of the world is in need of some answers here. This is not simply due to the fact that the issues resulting from the fragmentation of the region have impacted power relationships throughout the world, but also because they have contributed to the deterioration of European, American and Israeli relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds in general. Who can argue that the Sykes-Picot Agreement, or more accurately its finely-tuned San Remo metamorphosis, did not crush the nascent hopes of national movements such as that of the Arabs and the Kurds, while at the same time giving audacious hope to hitherto unacknowledged nationalities like that of European Zionism? Indeed, the current map of the Middle East with its problematic borders and gerrymandered ethnic enclaves not only gave rise to irredentist movements and unfulfilled and repressed national aspirations, but also could easily be blamed in part for the succession of wars which have since plagued this region. For there is no arguing but that the Middle East remains today one of the most unstable areas in the world, including its superficially-stable oil regimes of the peripheral areas. Neither can one deny that these underlying threats are the result of historic claims, most of which have been instigated and nurtured by the major powers. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to claim that this instability is traceable to the dictatorial systems of rule and the dynastic strangleholds, which emerged as the partners in the grand division of spoils resulting from WWI. McNamara is perfectly justified in bringing his considerable investigative and analytical skills to bear on the Middle East and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its related conclaves as his starting point. What is more difficult to accept, however, is his emphasis on the Hashemites, Sherif Hussein and his two sons and future rulers of Iraq and Jordan, namely Feisal and Abdullah, as the dominant architects of the new political geography of the modern Middle East. The reader is left with two intriguing questions right from the start: is the author implying that the Hashemites were the final determinants of the subsequent dismemberment of the region, or is he merely alluding to their starring capacity for capturing the imagination and the attention of the Western public during the final years of the immediate post- WWI era? Or is he merely reminding us of the ephemeral and ethereal nature of their claims, hence the absurdity of the entire Arab nationalism question? While the Haus series is biographical in scope and therefore the focus upon Feisal was mandated, the author could have offered a more nuanced and complex discussion of the Hashemites in the Arab world at the time. The writing of history, as any initiate knows, is usually about causation and motive. But it is also about the constant construction and deconstruction of the historical record and how legacies are made. In a period when world leaders could still sit together, sometimes without the benefit of maps, and redraw border lines, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 enjoyed the legitimacy of all of its precursors such as the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the 1885 Conference of Berlin and similar exercises in imperial hegemonic behavior. Often the shape of the table and who was seated and who was left standing had a great impact on developments in the world. As the late president of Turkey Turgut Ozal (1989-1993) humorously once put it, Turkey would rather be at the table rather than on the menu. Thus, the Hashemite presence at the Paris Peace Conference was itself recognition, no matter how ill-defined at the time, of their contribution to the war effort. But what the architects of the peace settlement failed to see, and what McNamara fails to mention, is that the conference happened to fall on the cusp of two juxtaposed periods, the outgoing age of empires and the incoming age of democracies, populist governments and the right of self-determination. This is a significant point since even though the mind-set of the prime actors in that conference was imperial and hegemonic, the reality was that the 1920s were the gateway to the age of modern nationalist governments and movements emerging from the wreck of

the two great Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. Everything in the study and writing of history is a pretense to realism, but realism in this case belonged to the mental framework of the nineteenth, not the twentieth century. McNamara begins his investigation by questioning the value of the Hashemite alliance to the allied effort, a theme running throughout his study. Eventually, this boils down to whether or not this alliance was worth anything in sheer military terms. Although not as denigrating of their effort as Richard Aldington's famous summation in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1955) that the entire Arab campaign was in his words "a side-show of a side-show"), McNamara comes very close. He begins by providing a useful assessment of the Hashemites and their power-base in the Arabian Peninsula, revealing the tenuous nature of their exclusive genealogical relationship to the Prophet Muhammad. Apparently, there were two branches of the Hashemite family, the Aoun and the Zaid clans, who vied for the leadership position of Ottoman surrogate over the two Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Aoun clan came under the headship of Hussein in 1908, at which time he began his approaches to British authorities in Istanbul, seeking their support for his candidacy to the position of the recently deposed Grand Sherif of Mecca, Ali Abdullah ibn Muhammad. Hussein promised to promote British interests in the peninsula. That much is history, but then the author goes out of his way to downgrade the significance of the Sharifian cause to the allied war effort. He claims in page after page that this contribution was of no psycho-political importance, ignoring the palpable British fear of alienating the sentiments of Egypt's and India's Muslim masses. Had the author stepped out of the straitjacket of his Western sources he would have confronted the enormous impact of this Sharifian betrayal on the unity of the Islamic world. Indeed, modern generations of Muslims, particularly Arabs, have even lapsed into a sort of Ottoman nostalgia in recent years, in recognition of the enormous damage which the Hashemite alliance with the Western powers has caused.<sup>1</sup> The Hashemites, of course, assumed naively that they would be rewarded generously for their daring break with their co-religionists, a break which, if anything, at least eased the way for Muslim Arabs outside of the peninsula, facilitating their act of rebellion. The author insists throughout this book that the military contribution of the Arabs was very disappointing, particularly the Bedouin force commanded by Feisal and T. E. Lawrence, which amounted to no more than 15,000 men, despite Hussein's claim that at least 100,000 Arabs in the Ottoman army were on the verge of declaring rebellion. McNamara also reminds us of the greed of the Hashemites who always demanded more money for their troops. He also downplays the significance of the Syrian Arabs, who, in his view, were late to join the rebellion due to their suppression by the Ottoman governor, the notoriously cruel Jemal Pasha. This may not accord with other claims by the author re the general disinterest of the Syrians in the rebellion in general and in marching under the orders of the Bedouin Prince Feisal. Only a small Arab urban elite, according to the author, were willing to dance to Feisal's tune. On the other hand, once he focuses on the activities and secret maneuvers of the players at the peace conference, the author renders a credible explanation of how the British manipulated Feisal's claims in order to depress the appetite of their French allies for Middle East territory. When French claims had to be honored, the British did not hesitate for a moment before acknowledging the rights and claims of their French allies in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The author never questions the authenticity of claims made by the French, based on the testimony of a Maronite Christian, one Chekri [sic] Ghanem, that Feisal's rule over Syria (which would have included Lebanon) would jeopardize the safety of the area's Christian communities. The British backed France's claims over Syria, knowing full well that what the French had in mind, as they later did, was to divide Syria along ethnic and sectarian lines. But then if Feisal's rebellion resonated mostly with the Arab urban elite only, why was the bulk of Feisal's following made of Bedouin elements? One of the weakest arguments in this book is that the British were very clear about excluding Palestine from the promise of a united Arab kingdom under Hashemite rule. This claim, of course, has long been the staple of Zionist claims against the legitimate promises made in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence. Here the author's references fit in this mold, and he buttresses his argument by debunking the work of a major figure of Arab nationalism during that period, namely George Antonius. Imagine the irony here of a Christian, British-educated Egyptian of Lebanese-Greek descent who proves to be one of the most ardent defenders of Sherif Hussein and the Arab Revolt in general. Instead of noting the unusual contribution of Christian Arabs to the revolt, the author takes the usual line of discrediting

their scholarship and their political affiliations. It is well-known of course that Antonius' *The Arab Awakening* (1938) which included segments of the correspondence proving British duplicity during the Sharifian negotiations led to British publication of the correspondence after the London Conference of 1939. According to William Cleveland, ranking American expert on this period, Antonius had acquired a copy of the correspondence from Prince (later King) Abdullah of Transjordan. 2 McNamara, however, writes that "Antonius claimed (referring to the correspondence) it demonstrated British betrayal of the Arab cause" (13). The fact that this duplicity was not just a matter of a "claim" is not recognized by the author. McNamara also demonstrates his utter lack of understanding of the rise of Arab nationalism due to betrayal by the British. Instead, he presents the work of such giants of the Arab nationalist ideology, such as Sati al-Husri, as a form of deceptive and extremist brainwashing of Arab youth. Husri, who developed the modern educational system of Iraq along nationalist lines, was also credited with attempting to do the same for Arab masses in general by working later through the Arab League of States. Husri was a Syrian who witnessed the battle of Maysaloun in which the French defeated the newly-formed Syrian army and he wrote his account of the battle, *The Day at Maysaloun* (Arabic. 1935). His theory of nationalism was based on the ties of language and history, which bind a people together, but he also saw a special role for Islam in the development of Arab nationalism and culture.<sup>3</sup> This humane definition of nationalism never merits any attention in this book. Instead, the author not only misrepresents Husri's family background by referring to him as a Yemenese [sic]-Syrian (he was born in Yemen where his father was a Syrian judge), but he also describes him as someone who "indoctrinated" Arab youth with his nationalist teachings. We are not surprised, therefore, when we read that Arab nationalists are routinely described as radicals and extremists who pressured Feisal against compromising with the French. Not only does this author seem to be completely oblivious to Arab disillusionment with their former British and French mandatory powers and erstwhile allies, he also declines to consult much revisionist literature on this subject. Indeed, what his methodology demonstrates is simply that research based primarily on archival material has its own limitations. The archives, especially in this case those of the British and French, must always be balanced by other interpretations, especially if a body of relevant material exists by other antagonists and in other languages. After all, archival information is simply the human interpretation of an event, even though by a close and, sometime, official observer of that event. Furthermore, the author never misses an opportunity to denigrate Arab nationalism, even extending to someone as distant from this period as Nasser. Summing up his views on the failure of the Hashemites to realize their dream of Arab unity, he writes: "However, Arab unity was to prove not only beyond the Hashemites, but also their more radical challengers, such as Nasser" (p. 152). One wonders what is Nasser's relationship to this discussion? There are two other neglected facets in this study. The author does not attempt to deal with British motivation for denying Arab claims during the peace talks. He downplays the role of Zionism in winning over British policy-makers. He also says very little about the role of Christian Zionism in influencing people like Arthur Balfour and Lloyd George. This is surprising in view of the fact that the topic of Christian Zionism (which is a major influence over American policy-makers of today) and its impact on the post-WWI settlement is hardly a disputed topic anymore. David Fromkin in his outstanding study of the same period has already settled this issue in *A Peace to End All Peace* (1989). Secondly, and even more central to this study, the author makes no attempt to understand the link between Islam and Arab nationalism. Had he done so, this would have informed his understanding of why Feisal attempted to please both camps. Had he consulted more current Arab references, he would have understood what at least generations of Christian Arabs have always comprehended, namely that Islam was the Arabs' civilizational gift to the world. This view recurs in the ideologies of the early Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in the writings of the Ba'ath party in Syria, particularly in the works of Michel Aflaq, as well the Arab Nationalist Movement of George Habash and Nasser's leader-centered version of Arab nationalism. Why was it so surprising for Feisal to espouse this view? In summary, this is a useful work for those seeking to understand the roots of today's turbulence in the Middle East. One comes out with a greater understanding of British and French imperial policies. But, alas, this is far from a balanced study, but rather an opinionated work in which the reader is hardly granted any room to reach his or her conclusions. It is also a study

inhabiting a time-warp, written as though the world has never learned anything since the events of 1919. 1 See the works of Bashir Nafi and Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, among others 2 William Cleveland, "Antonius, George" in Philip Mattar, ed. Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa, Vol. I (2004), pp. 213-14. 3 See: "Husri, Sati al-" in same reference as above, Vol. II, pp. 1051-52. -- Ghada Hashem Talhami H-Diplo Review 20100611

#### About the Author

Robert McNamara is a lecturer in International History at the University of Ulster at Coleraine. His teaching and research interests lie in the relationship between the Great Powers and the Middle East, and British foreign and imperial policy in the 20th century. His publications include Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East from the Egyptian Revolution to the Six-Day War (2003).

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